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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a resolution passed by the New York State United Teachers calling on New York State to adopt a "Reading for Life" plan. Also, included is a letter to Chancellor Carl T. Hayden discussing the resolution and recommendations on changes in high school graduation requirements. The paper first sets out the resolution on the "Reading for Life" plan, which aims to expand and improve opportunities for quality early learning experiences by: (1) guaranteeing all 4-year-olds access to a prekindergarten program; (2) requiring all school districts to provide full-day kindergarten and making attendance compulsory; (3) aiming for a goal of one teacher for every 15 students in kindergarten through grade 3; (4) identifying and correcting reading problems at much earlier stages than is currently common; and (5)providing literacy programs for parents. The paper then presents the letter which describes the Reading for Life plan and discusses changing high-school graduation requirements, including why graduation requirements are central; the need to maintain multiple diplomas; flexibility and student choice; principles for balancing rigor and flexibility; and the need for an advisory committee. (RS)

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Special Order of Business

Reading For Life

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May 1-3, 1997

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Special Order of Business #1
Reading for Life

WHEREAS, kindergarten teachers report that one-third of American children entering school lack necessary school-readiness skills; and

WHEREAS, the pivotal role of reading in determining overall school success is affirmed by research indicating that disadvantaged third graders who are reading below grade level and who have failed one or more grades are extremely unlikely to complete high school; and

WHEREAS, a child who is not expected to perform to high standards, or is not supported in reaching high standards, can experience failure that leads to lasting alienation from schooling; and

WHEREAS, New York State does not have clear and specific standards for reading skills and knowledge that students should acquire in grades one, two and three; and

WHEREAS, the educational value, long-term effectiveness and cost benefits of high quality preschool programs have been demonstrated and documented by such initiatives as the New York State Prekindergarten Program and the Perry Preschool Program of Ypsilanti, Michigan; and

WHEREAS, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has found that reading problems that could be addressed with 30 minutes of special help in kindergarten can take two hours of help per day to correct in the fourth grade; and

WHEREAS, government research has demonstrated that children can be identified as poor readers when they are as young as four or five, based merely on how they hear, remember and repeat sounds encountered in everyday speech; and

WHEREAS, New York State does not require a uniform evaluation of students' reading skills until the third grade and is contemplating postponing such evaluation until the fourth grade; and

WHEREAS, a recent New York State United Teachers telephone survey of teachers in grades kindergarten through four found that 79 percent of responding teachers identified early intervention and remediation as critical factors in helping all students learn to read and that respondents cited parent involvement and reduced class sizes as the second and third most critical factors, respectively;

WHEREAS, the NYSUT telephone survey revealed that many school districts do not have clearly defined expectations of what reading skills should be taught and what students should be able to read at each grade level, even though 94 percent of teachers indicated support for the creation of such standards; and

WHEREAS, research studies have repeatedly found that as class sizes increase, particularly in the early grades, student achievement drops and discipline problems grow; therefore, be it

RESOLVED, that New York State United Teachers finds and declares:

- that every child can learn and that all children are entitled to the chance to engage in high quality educational experiences that challenge them and enable them to achieve to the limits of their potential;

- that children's prospects for success in school are profoundly influenced by their earliest learning experiences; and

- that acquisition of reading skills is an especially important factor in assuring subsequent academic success; and be it further

RESOLVED, that, in recognition of the foregoing, NYSUT endorses and urges the state Board of Regents and the Legislature to adopt a "Reading for Life" plan designed to improve children's odds for achieving success in school by:

- guaranteeing access for all four-year-olds to a public school prekindergarten program that is taught by a certified teacher, using a state core curriculum;

- establishing a bank of equivalent, individually administered state readiness inventories designed to aid schools and teachers in gauging the strengths and needs of children before they enter kindergarten and bench-marked state assessments to be used as tools for guiding instruction and extra help provided by a trained specialist beginning in kindergarten and extending through all the elementary grades for students in grades one, two and three;

- calling on school districts to provide literacy programs for parents and to offer workshops instructing parents in effective at-home strategies to reinforce reading methods taught in the classroom;

- mandating that all districts provide full-day kindergarten and making attendance compulsory;

- urging first grade teachers to focus at least 90 minutes of class time each day on reading instruction including skills development and reading in the content areas;

- prescribing clear reading standards as part of a grade-by-grade common core of study for all elementary schools;

- urging schools to adopt and use reading instruction programs whose effectiveness has been formally validated based on programs identified in the United States Department of Education study of promising programs for at-risk children;* and

- pursuing the goal of one teacher for every 15 students in kindergarten through grade 3 with teaching assistants to provide tutorial reinforcement in reading and to assist with general classroom instruction. NYSUT will seek appropriate funding to effect this program.

**Three Year Effects of Ten Promising Programs on the Academic Achievement of Children Placed at Risk*, United States Department of Education.

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May 23, 1997

The Honorable Carl T. Hayden
303 William Street
Elmira, New York 14901

Dear Chancellor Hayden:

I am writing to apprise you of two actions taken by the Representative Assembly (RA) of New York State United Teachers at its annual meeting earlier this month.

The RA is NYSUT's basic policy-making body. It typically draws over 1,700 delegates and alternates from NYSUT locals throughout the state and considers resolutions that become the basis for our attempts to influence the direction of state policy. Among the many actions taken by this year's RA are two that I especially want to bring to your attention: first, a resolution calling on the state to adopt a "Reading for Life" plan and, second, a resolution establishing principles that NYSUT urges you and your fellow Regents to support as you contemplate changes in high school graduation requirements.

READING FOR LIFE

The Regents have acted to raise educational standards by implementing a plan to require all students to pass five Regents examinations as a condition for high school graduation. This requirement now rightly obliges all of us to help more students to meet the higher standards — including large numbers of students who have never before been challenged to take Regents courses. Getting all students off to a good start in school can ease the challenge — that is what the NYSUT Reading for Life plan seeks to accomplish.

Rationale

Intuitively, we all know that competence in reading is the foundation for success in all other facets of schooling. The NYSUT Reading for Life plan is premised on this basic principle and on these supporting facts:

- In a recent NYSUT survey of public school teachers in grades kindergarten through four, responding teachers indicated that between one-fifth and one-third of their current students are reading below grade level.

Thomas Y. Hobart, Jr., President
Alan B. Lubin, Executive Vice President · Antonia Cortese, First Vice President · Walter Dunn, Jr., Second Vice President · Fred Nauman, Secretary-Treasurer

- Federally-sponsored research has revealed that children can be identified as potentially poor readers as early as four or five based merely on how they hear, remember, and repeat sounds encountered in everyday speech.
- The NYSUT survey of early grade teachers found that not only are many schools failing to identify students who are faltering in reading, many have not even adopted standards for what students should be able to read at each grade level.
- Finally, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has found that reading problems that could be addressed with 30 minutes of help in kindergarten can take two hours per day in third grade.

Elements of the plan: high quality early learning and prompt action to correct problems

NYSUT's Reading for Life plan would respond to these conditions with two basic strategies. First, it would expand and improve opportunities for quality early learning experiences by: (1) guaranteeing all four-year-olds access to a prekindergarten program, taught by a certified teacher using a state core curriculum; (2) by requiring all school districts to provide full-day kindergarten and making attendance compulsory; and (3) by aiming for a goal of one teacher for every 15 students in kindergarten through grade three.

Second, it would move to identify and correct reading problems at much earlier stages than is currently common practice. Clear reading standards would be prescribed as part of a grade-by-grade common core of study for all elementary schools. A common statewide readiness inventory would also be provided for all students entering kindergarten. The knowledge and skills of all entering students would be measured against the same standard, providing valuable information not only for diagnosing problem areas, but also a common starting point for measuring the "value-added" by subsequent schooling. The report card would become a more valuable tool. Lastly, "safety net" state assessments would be administered in reading in grades one, two and three. These assessments would evaluate a student's strengths and needs against what is expected of students statewide. They would not only guide instruction but trigger extra help for students in reading.

In addition, our Reading for Life plan calls for providing literacy programs for parents, as needed, and offering workshops to instruct parents in effective at-home strategies to reinforce classroom reading instruction. It also urges schools to use reading instruction programs whose effectiveness has been validated and urges first grade teachers to dedicate at least 90 minutes of class time each day to reading instruction. Finally, we will seek adequate state support to implement all the pieces of the agenda.

I hope that you and your fellow Regents will move to implement those portions of the plan that do not require legislative action and will join with NYSUT in urging the Legislature and the Governor to enact changes in law or funding needed to proceed with other elements.

GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Why graduation requirements are central

NYSUT attaches great importance to your deliberations directed toward changing high school graduation requirements. Al Shanker used to say "If you don't know where you are going, you'll never get there." Graduation requirements tell parents, teachers, administrators, and the public, including teachers in the earliest grades, the destination we seek for the students we serve. More specifically, graduation requirements matter because:

- they set standards for a high school diploma and, by so doing, tell students, parents, employers and the community what the diploma stands for;
- they tell everyone what subjects must be taught and how much classroom instruction students are to receive; and
- finally, they help define an equity safety net for all students, establishing the absolute minimum educational program that all children are entitled to receive, irrespective of the wealth of their community or the impulses of a temporary majority on their local school board.

The resolution adopted by the recent RA does not bind NYSUT to a position supporting or opposing any of the four proposals now before the Regents. Rather, it sets forth principles to be used by teachers and others in evaluating those proposals and any new ones that might emerge.

No new standards should be adopted unless they improve on current ones; more credits should be required

Central to our principles is the belief that no new set of requirements should be adopted unless it comprises stronger, clearer, truer reflections of what students need to know and be able to do if they are to succeed in life beyond the classroom. Accordingly, one specific step our principles call for is increasing the number of credits to be required for graduation the current 20.5 units (including physical education). We also believe that any new requirements should reflect the commencement-level expectations expressed in the New York State Learning Standards previously adopted by the Board of Regents. Some of the time needed to meet our suggested requirements is already available since too many students are currently failing to pursue rigorous courses of study in their senior year. Before we ask the public to support an extension of the school day or year, we must first maximize the use of all existing school time.

The need to maintain multiple diplomas

Poll after poll indicates that the public wants more academic rigor from the schools. The public is right and new requirements must give unmistakable reassurance that its will has been respected. However, some of the proposals before the Regents appear to envision the elimination of one or more of the diploma options now available to students (Regents, local or individual education program (IEP) diploma). Whatever the reality, whatever your intent, we believe that the elimination of any of these alternatives would fuel public belief that expectations are being watered-down. Even if the Regents diploma is retained in name as the sole diploma option, we believe the public would conclude that standards are being lowered in order to allow all students to meet them. We suspect, also, that with the passage of time, the public's judgment would be affirmed.

The tension between rigor and flexibility

From the hearings conducted by the District Superintendents and the initial forums convened by the Commissioner, several divergent themes have emerged which have come to be cited as suggesting a need for more flexibility. These include:

- providing more time to accomplish the standards (after school, extended periods, summer courses, and so forth);
- authorizing test/assessment modifications, for alternative forms of the various assessments and for averaging the scores on the various required assessments;
- using community-based learning or apprenticeship experiences; and
- authorizing course credit without class time.

Some participants in the hearings and forums have summarized them as revealing a desire for *more rigor* and *more flexibility*. If more flexibility is to be used to produce more rigor, NYSUT would concur — extended instructional time, reasonable test modifications, and diverse instructional approaches are all things that teachers in districts with "all-Regents" curricula have told us need to be accommodated if the success of all students is to be assured.

On the other hand, elements that would alter the assessment standard and, in so doing, open the door to lower academic standards should be dismissed as simply unacceptable. NYSUT's principles hold that this kind of flexibility would give local school boards the opportunity to establish less rigorous graduation requirements by creating their own standards and tests for gauging what students should know and be able to do. Especially in times of budgetary crisis, this kind of flexibility would be seized as a vehicle for eliminating programs and course offerings. The end result would be a weakening in the state's capacity to set and enforce uniform student achievement standards and a widening in the gulf between poor and affluent communities in the learning opportunities they afford their students.

Flexibility and student choice

Flexibility has also been cited as necessary to allow greater student choice in course selection. We challenge this premise. Alone, students cannot be expected to know what they need to know. Absent adequate guidance services, expanding student choice is a recipe for disaster and disappointment. Further, as we have emphasized, school boards will determine what choices appear on students' menus and we fear that under fiscal pressure, their impulse will be to narrow choices to the barest minimums required by state mandates.

Some principles for balancing rigor and flexibility

Because local flexibility might yield lower standards and diminished opportunities for students, NYSUT's principles hold that:

- high school graduation requirements and tests should be developed by the state;
- where state assessments are not now available, they should be developed (e.g., Technology; Health, Family and Consumer Science; Physical Education; the Arts and Music; and Occupational Education);

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- performance assessments (resembling science labs) should be developed for all subject areas; completion of these assessments would become a prerequisite for taking required exams; and
- currently required courses should not be made optional.

To provide alternative routes for students to meet prescribed Regents standards, our principles call for the development of Regents-level courses and examinations in applied academic subjects (for example, "tech-prep" and some occupational education programs).

Unit of study requirements and "testing-out"

Finally, our principles are built on the belief that the cornerstone of a good education is defined by the extent and character of a student's interactions with teachers and classmates. Rigorous standards are not advanced by encouraging students to test-out of academic requirements. We have always supported strong testing requirements but we also know that being an educated person involves more than acquiring deftness at passing tests. Accordingly, there should be no diminution in the requirement that a student receive 180 minutes of instruction, per week, to earn a unit of credit.

The need for an advisory committee

Because of the profound consequences attached to graduation standards, NYSUT believes that the Regents should establish an advisory committee to oversee the revision process. Our principles call upon the Regents to appoint a committee comprised of parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, business and civic leaders and others drawn from the education community and the public at-large — all the people who have a stake in the outcome of your deliberations and whose perspectives you need to weigh with care. The importance of the topic and the need to safeguard and advance academic rigor while exploring reasonable accommodations to flexibility merit seeking the contributions that an advisory committee can make.

CONCLUSION

As Regents, you are the principal trustees of this state's public education system. Despite the historical contributions of public education to the development of our state and nation, these are difficult times for the institution that you and we serve. A majority of Americans still support the public schools, but they are largely silent. Meanwhile, vocal critics relentlessly condemn the schools for alleged failure and stagnation and they propose radical experiments as solutions, unsupported by evidence either for what they condemn or what they propose. But their words strike a resonant chord in members of the public who are disturbed by what they see as a lack of discipline and an indifference to standards in public schools.

Your effort to revise high school graduation standards can help reassure parents and taxpayers of our shared determination to fully prepare students for the requirements of work, family and citizenship in a time that will be more complex than what you or I have known. But if mishandled, or precipitously implemented, revisions in graduation requirements could accelerate the erosion of public confidence in our schools. We are confident that adoption of the principles and procedures outlined in our Representative Assembly resolution would avert that prospect.

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Careful revision of graduation requirements, coupled with the action you have already taken to phase-out Regents Competency Tests, would respond to the public's desire for higher standards. But if we believe that our standards constitute the absolute essential learning needed for success in life beyond school, then it is patently wrong to deny any child a fair chance to attain those standards. Further, if we raise standards but fail to provide more help for students who are struggling to meet current expectations, one result is predictable: failure rates will rise and public doubt will grow. Our Reading for Life plan reaffirms the belief that you share — that all children can learn and are entitled to opportunities that challenge and enable them to achieve to the limits of their potential; it defines practical steps that must be taken to point all students on a trajectory toward that goal.

We hope that you and your fellow Regents will embrace and act upon the principles advanced in the two resolutions I have discussed in this letter. Thank you for your attention to our concerns. We look forward to discussing them with you in the months to come.

Sincerely,

Toni

Antonia Cortese
First Vice President

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